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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 001224

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR; JOINT
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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: NEW PA INFORMATION DIRECTOR ON MEDIA, HAMAS,
RECONCILIATION

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Greg Marchese
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

Summary

1. (C) In a July 13 meeting with Polchief, newly-appointed Palestinian Authority (PA) Director of Information Ghassan al Khatib outlined plans to reform the Palestinian Authority's communications strategy. He noted that Hamas support fell in Gaza after December 2008-January 2009 Israeli combat operations, but rose in the West Bank due to Al Jazeera's role as the primary source of news for Palestinians. Rather than focus on hapless PLO-run local media outlets, the PA government must build strategic communications abilities within each ministry and broaden its approach. Al Khatib, who plans to assume his new position on August 16, said the USG should maintain a low public profile on security assistance and in the lead-up to the Fatah Sixth Party Conference. He also predicted Fatah-Hamas reconciliation talks will not succeed unless the USG creates incremental incentives for Hamas. End Summary.

PA Strategic Communications a "Complete Failure"

2. (C) In a meeting just two days after his appointment, al Khatib, a veteran pollster and head of the leftist People's Party, said he considers the PA's traditional approach to public relations a "complete failure." He intends to professionalize PA strategic communications by building institutional capacity within the ministries and encouraging ministers to take a more proactive role. Al Khatib noted that PLO control of Palestinian public television and radio limits his ability to directly affect programming. Most Palestinians rely on Al Jazeera for their news in any case, so the PA should focus on regional media, he said.

Measuring Shifts in Hamas Popularity

3. (C) According to polls conducted by al Khatib's institute, Hamas's popularity declined in the Gaza Strip following December 2008-January 2009 Israeli combat operations, as Gazans blamed Hamas, at least in part, for the resulting destruction. In contrast, Hamas support actually increased in the West Bank. Al Khatib attributed this divergence to the fact that West Bankers primarily saw the conflict through Al Jazeera, which focused on IDF attacks and portrayed Hamas positively. Al Khatib said few Palestinians followed the conflict on Palestinian broadcast media, which he termed "technically and professionally a disaster."

Profile of US Assistance in Fatah Reform, Security

¶4. (C) Al Khatib said that the public profile of U.S. security assistance is increasingly becoming an issue in the West Bank. Critics of the PA are manipulating public comments by USG officials to argue that the "real" mission of USG-trained PA security forces (PASF) is to protect Israel, not serve the Palestinian people. Al Khatib stressed the importance of portraying the PASF as guardians of Palestinian law and order, and advised the USG to take a low profile in ongoing train-and-equip efforts. He had similar advice with regard to the upcoming Fatah Sixth Party Congress, assessing that overt USG engagement would likely backfire and endanger Fatah's credibility.

Fatah-Hamas Reconciliation: Wrong Issues on the Table

¶5. (C) Al Khatib, who attended recent rounds of Egyptian-sponsored Fatah-Hamas talks, was pessimistic over prospects for reconciliation. He suggested that resolution of issues currently on the table in Cairo depended on resolution of issues "off the table," like prisoner exchanges, a medium-term "hudna" (truce), and opening the Gaza crossings to goods. Al Khatib proposed a "package deal," in which Israel and Egypt would engage Hamas on the release of Gilad Shalit and the opening of crossings, and the international community would create incentives for Hamas to improve the tone of its rhetoric and adopt internationally-acceptable positions.

¶6. (C) Polchief noted President Obama's speech in Cairo outlined such a path, if Hamas accepts the Quartet

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principles. Al Khatib said renouncing violence ("in word and in deed") and respecting prior PLO agreements are key. If Hamas accepts these points, he said, the Quartet should be willing to allow Hamas members to sit in a PA government, based on an unambiguous platform consistent with the Quartet principles. Without these incentives, he argued, Hamas has no reason to share power, and reconciliation efforts would remain stalled.

WALLES